

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20510

November 16, 2018

The Honorable Robert Wilkie  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue Northwest  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

Thank you for your continued attention to the significant challenges facing America's veterans and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as you work to improve access to quality care, streamline the claims process, and improve VA accountability, among other issues. As Congress and the VA continue to work together to confront these challenges and carry out the VA's mission, we would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you and discuss the challenges faced by South Dakota veterans.

As you know, one issue of particular importance in our state is the VA's planned restructuring of the VA Black Hills Health Care System (BHHCS). In December 2011, the VA publically announced its plan to close the VA hospital in Hot Springs, SD, replace it with a Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC), and move the domiciliary from Hot Springs to Rapid City as part of the planned CBOC expansion. From the beginning, we have raised concerns with the VA about the impact the closure would have on access to care for our region's rural and tribal veterans. We sought explanations for the questionable data used to support the proposal, as the VA could not produce a cost-benefit analysis until six months later. Area veterans also believe that past VA leadership has mismanaged the facility into a state of decline, supporting a predetermined decision to close the medical center.

You are now the fourth VA Secretary to oversee this matter, which underscores how long South Dakota veterans and the town of Hot Springs, "the Veterans Town," have endured great uncertainty about the future of their VA and access to care. Over the past seven years, we have led efforts to secure credible data and foster an honest conversation about the important and life-saving services provided in Hot Springs. Moreover, we do not believe that the VA should consider any realignment of services in an ad hoc manner, which is why we have supported appropriations language to prohibit the VA from proceeding with any reconfiguration of services in VISN 23 until it completes a national realignment strategy.

As you continue to appreciate the scope of the VA's mission and footprint, we hope you will consider visiting Hot Springs to see firsthand the quality, five star care provided and hear from those personally impacted by the VA's realignment plan.<sup>[1]</sup> For example, as your predecessors have heard, the Hot Springs VA has a proven track record for serving veterans enrolled in its Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and

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<sup>[1]</sup> [https://www.va.gov/QUALITYOFCARE/measure-up/End\\_of\\_Year\\_Hospital\\_Star\\_Rating\\_FY2018.asp](https://www.va.gov/QUALITYOFCARE/measure-up/End_of_Year_Hospital_Star_Rating_FY2018.asp)

substance abuse. We know that we are not alone in thinking that the outstanding program at Hot Springs could be expanded or serve as a national model for care, perhaps as a non-coastal division of the National Center for PTSD.

We hope we will soon be able to discuss this and other matters concerning South Dakota veterans. Thank you for your consideration to meet in Washington, DC, and also visit South Dakota. We look forward to working with you to continue improving veterans health care in our state and throughout the country.

Sincerely,



JOHN THUNE  
United States Senator



M. MICHAEL ROUNDS  
United States Senator



KRISTI NOEM  
Member of Congress